



## **Book Review: Teacher preparation in Ireland: history, policy and future directions, by Tom O'Donoghue, Judith Harford and Teresa O'Doherty**

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Teacher preparation in Ireland: history, policy and future directions, by Tom O'Donoghue, Judith Harford and Teresa O'Doherty, Bingley, Emerald Publishing, 2017, vi +350 pp., £60.00 (hardback) ISBN 978-1-78714-512-2

In Ireland the teaching profession has carried status and, has been regarded as an important vehicle for social advancement. This volume by Tom O'Donoghue, Judith Harford and Teresa O'Doherty charts the development of teacher education in Ireland from the formation of the Irish Free State in 1922 to present day independent Ireland. Its brief is confined to the 26 counties which separated from Britain when the island was partitioned. I understand that a companion volume, by Linda Clarke and Sean Farren, will trace the progress of teacher education north of the Irish border. It is to be hoped that the northern edition will avail itself of its later publication to make connections with the work under review. Indeed, it is slightly disappointing that the latter references little of the confusion emanating from partition when, for a short time, northern Protestants continued their training in Dublin and does not discuss the influence of the Irish peace process on the direction of education after 1998.

That said, the book provides a detailed, informative and scholarly account of teacher preparation in post partition Ireland. It does so not in a vacuum but by outlining the general political circumstances, and the prevailing educational environment, in which decisions were taken. As it acknowledges, it often relies on secondary sources, particularly the works of John Coolahan and Aine Hyland. In itself, this is a fitting, if unintentional, tribute to Coolahan, who died recently. However, it also carefully dissects key policy documents and these are used effectively to highlight significant issues and turning points. Organisationally, the authors opt for a chronological framework. This makes sense in a volume which covers nearly a century of developments. Three broad periods are identified in which educational policy and practice were shaped: the years of state formation until the end of the de Valera era in the late 1960s; the emergence of modern Ireland during the seventies and eighties when more informed ministers of education such as Jack Lynch began switching the focus from cultural nationalism to promoting human capital and, finally, Ireland operating as a confident member of the European Union.

In each era, a decision is taken which is illustrative of the impact of wider educational policy on teacher education. In the early years, the legislative desire to have the Irish language as the medium of instruction in order to reinforce a sense of national identity appears to have held back more progressive educational practice and convinced students that they were 'being prepared to be a teacher in the mould' (p.100). Conversely, the primary curriculum of 1971 opened teachers up to the possibility of providing for the individual needs of children and the welfare of society, even if practice fell well behind aspiration. Latterly, the authors identify the establishment of a Teaching Council in 2005 as a critical moment in boosting professional autonomy and giving educationalists a stronger voice in government policy. A strength of the book is that it devotes separate sections to the preparation of primary and secondary teachers. This allows the reader to get to grips with the commonalities and differences pertinent to the evolving provision of each and is a reminder that in Ireland, and elsewhere, the concept of teacher can be defined differently according to the expectations of each sector.

The chronological structure and in-depth treatment sometimes makes it difficult for the reader to scan the bigger picture. Nonetheless, underlying educational themes do emerge that give insight into policy trends both in Ireland and beyond. One is the time it has taken for teacher education and broader educational policy, especially curriculum, to become coherent and complementary. The authors demonstrate for much of the last quarter of the 20th century, the rhetoric of child centredness embodied in policy visions for primary education was less evident in teachers' practice. In particular, the isolation of initial teacher education and the neglect of career long professional development hindered continuity. A second theme is the obstacle posed by teacher education and educational research's struggle for status in academia. For a long time, prejudice in Irish universities helped to position education on the fringes of third level education. The book documents that struggle empathetically and paints an optimistic picture of an increasingly confident professional community, supported by recent reforms which have consolidated pre-service, induction and in-service teacher education in regional university hubs.

At the wider political and cultural levels, two further themes stand out. One is the direct relationship between economic wellbeing and the will and capability to invest in education in a resource limited environment. The authors track this through time. Early independent Ireland did not give priority to teacher preparation and even after the economic take-off of the 1970s, progress stalled temporarily on two occasions, in the eighties and after the economic crash of 2007, in the face of austerity. Another thread through the book relates to the place of the Catholic Church in Irish education and society. The pre-eminent influence of the Church (particularly on education), and the dramatic decline of this in recent years, is one of the defining characteristics of modern Ireland. The authors chart that, after initial resistance, the Church quickly bought in to an alliance between religion and the Irish culture as the cement to keep Ireland a conservative bastion on the edge of Europe. Clerical power enforced conformity which even extended to the small Church of Ireland (Protestant) teacher college. This power could even be enacted in opposition to State policy as when the Christian Brothers Marino Institute successfully resisted teaching through the Irish language on the grounds that it was preparing its students for missionary work overseas. The final chapters then track the decline in religious influence in the face of secularisation in society and professionalisation in education. This is nicely illustrated though a short case-study of the recent merger between Dublin City University, St Patrick's Drumcondra, Mater Dei Institute and the Church of Ireland College, resulting in a 'religion neutral' programme (p.201). The authors refer to this as the 'greatest change that has taken place in the field' (p.205) since the inception of the State.

A final political dimension is covered in the book but is not given sufficient attention. Clearly, many of the changes in teacher education in Ireland have been influenced by ideas from outside. Initially, these were absorbed from the former colonial power, England. However, what the authors describe as 'the unprecedented level and rate of change' (p.206) of the last decade, seems much more to emanate from Ireland's increasingly comfortable alignment with Europe. It is a pity that the summary sections at the end of each chapter, which simply reiterate content, do not pursue the themes that cut across the entirety of the period. Similarly the concluding chapter might have explicitly highlighted these forces which have shaped change. However, importantly it warns against complacency by pointing out that

Irish teacher education, to date, has largely avoided the compromising influences of technicism, bureaucratic accountability and the market economy.

In conclusion, this work is a comprehensive account of the evolution of teacher preparation in Ireland and as such is a valuable reference for scholars. If its attention to detail occasionally challenges the reader's concentration, it also contains a few gems – for example the 'manliness' expected from male teachers in the 1930s or the views of writers, O'Faoláin and McGahern, and musician, Geldof, on the rote learning of their school days. This book makes an important contribution to documenting the history of education in the Irish state.

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